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Watergate Statement Disputed

By Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein
Washington Post Staff Writers

Presidential Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler and Clark R. Mollenhoff, President Nixon's former investigative reporter-in-residence at the White House, differed yesterday about what Ziegler said about the Watergate bugging being financed by Mr. Nixon's re-election committee.

Mollenhoff, who left the White House staff to reclaim his job as a hard-nosed, muckraking Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the Des Moines Register, quoted Ziegler in a front page story yesterday as saying:

"There is no question but that the money came from the committee."

Although there have been extensive reports linking Nixon campaign funds to the celebated bugging, Ziegler's statement—if he said it—would be the first official acknowledgment that the President's campaign committee financed the electronic eavesdropping operation.

Ziegler said yesterday, however, that the quote was "a misinterpretation of what I said" to Mollenhoff, who quit in 1970 as President Nixon's special counsel assigned to investigate official wrongdoing in the executive branch.

"I said I have no personal knowledge of any aspect of this matter other than what I have read in the press," Ziegler said.

"Therefore I am not in a position to draw any conclusions or to make any authoritative statements whatsoever," he continued, "and the reporter for the Des Moines Register was so informed."

Mollenhoff replied yesterday: "That's a hell of a lot different than his position yesterday."

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Reading the quote again from his notes in a telephone interview, Mollenhoff said: "I don't back away from the story a bit."

But Mollenhoff had additional complaints. He said he was not informed by the White House of President Nixon's hastily summoned press conference on Thursday, and accordingly arrived late—after receiving word from elsewhere. Then he was not allowed to enter the press conference, Mollenhoff said.

Mollenhoff, who has been writing columns for nearly three months complaining about the lack of official comment on the Watergate incident, said he wanted to ask the President about the financing of the bugging operation. "I also wanted to press questions about the inadequacy of the investigation," he said.

He said the question of the funds, a matter not answered in the indictment of seven men Sept. 16, has been nagging him. "I've been dwelling on that particular point for weeks and months in my column," he noted.

Because he wasn't notified about Thursday's press conference, Mollenhoff said he thought he would never have a chance to ask about the Watergate financing before the Nov. 7 election.

"I had been blocked by Zieglers incompetence," Mollenhoff said.

So he obtained an interivew with Ziegler to discuss the matter after the President's press conference.

"If Ziegler didn't know, then he had no business talking about it . . . and (now) if he is admitting his lack of qualification, how could he make denials (about the Watergate bugging) for the President," Mollenhoff asked. "That ought to be pointed out."

Ziegler has issued repeated denials of official involvement in the bugging, saying that no one presently employed in government or the White House was involved in the Watergate operation.

Mollenhoff said that Ziegler's denial about the quote was "sneaky" because it did not refute the quote but merely asserts a lack of knowledge.

Ziegler contended yesterday that he thought his conversation with Mollenhoff was merely "casual." He said his statement meant that—on the basis of press accounts—someone could draw the conclusion that "there is no question but that the money came from the committee."

In columns, Mollenhoff has charged that the Nixon administration could force the testimony of at least one of the seven men indicted in the case by granting immunity from prosecution.

Mollenhoff said in a Sept. 24 column: "Various immunity statutes have been used for more than six years to break so-called 'conspiracies of silence' that blocked grand juries from obtaining information on 'Mr. Big' in organized crime conspiracies."

He said these laws could and should have been used "by the Justice Department to force revelations of the financing of the burglary-bugging at the Watergate."

"Obviously, former White House aides G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt Jr. (two of those indicted in the Watergate case), know at least a part of the answer to that crucial question," he said.

Mollenhoff said yesterday that he would have raised the same question if he still was a special counsel to the President.

"It hasn't been answered and it's important," he said.